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SUBJECT: PORTUGAL 2009 FOREST FIRE ROUNDUP

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SUMMARY

[¶](#)1. (U) Portugal forest fire experts Mark Beighley and Tiago Oliveira said 2009 was a light forest fire season in Portugal, and the government of Portugal (GOP) has strengthened its firefighting capabilities since 2006. Education programs to reduce human-caused ignitions and forest fuel reduction efforts need to continue to safeguard forestry resources which generate 3 percent of Portugal's gross domestic product (GDP) and support over 250,000 jobs. The expanded GOP firefighting capabilities should be adequate for normal fire seasons but risk being overwhelmed in heavy fire seasons like 2003 and 2005. End summary.

[¶](#)2. (U) Poleconoff spoke with Mark Beighley, formerly of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service and now an independent consultant on forest fire issues, and Tiago Oliveira, risk manager for Portuguese pulp and paper company Grupo Portucel-Soporcel (GPS), several times about the 2009 fire season in Portugal. Beighley was in Portugal this summer under contract to GPS to conduct an assessment of GOP forest firefighting capability and improvements to the firefighting system since the Forest Defense Against Fire Plan (FDAFP) was implemented in 2006. Before his retirement from the USDA Beighley worked extensively with GOP forestry authorities and contributed to the FDAFP. Beighley and Oliveira shared their assessment of the 2009 fire season and fire fighting capabilities in Portugal.

[¶](#)3. (U) Portugal's forest resources are important economically and environmentally. The forestry sector in Portugal provides 3 percent of GDP, over 10 percent of Portuguese exports, and over 250,000 jobs. The forests are also critical for maintaining hydrological cycles, protecting against soil erosion, supporting biodiversity, and for contributing to scenic leisure and tourism activities.

ANOTHER LIGHT FIRE SEASON IN 2009

[¶](#)4. (U) Although final figures are unavailable, 2009 was a relatively light fire season for Portugal, with the number of fire occurrences and total burned area below average. (Note: A normal fire season in Portugal is a maximum of 250 new fires per day, and total area burned per season has averaged 157,000 hectares over the last nine years.) The fire season started early with larger brush fires in the north during a late March and early April dry spell. After April temperatures dropped and the number of fires did not increase again until late August, continuing until early October.

[¶](#)5. (U) 2003 and 2005 were much heavier fire seasons in Portugal, with total burned areas of 430,000 and 300,000 hectares, respectively. Post coordinated USG monetary and technical support during these devastating fire seasons,

producing a bilateral fire cooperation program in cooperation with the Luso-American Development Foundation (FLAD) and facilitating assistance from USDA firefighting experts (including Beighley) (reftels). These devastating seasons led to the implementation of the 2006 Forest Defense Against Fire Plan.

IMPROVED CAPABILITIES SINCE 2006

¶6. (U) Firefighting capabilities have improved since the GOP adopted the 2006 FDAFP. The national firefighting organization has been reformed to improve program coordination and integration, and first responders are better-trained and specialized. Firefighting "combat strength" has increased to about 9,500 firefighters, over 2,200 vehicles and 56 aircraft. The GOP has also encouraged more community-level planning, and 234 municipalities have developed their own forest fire response plans.

¶7. (U) The weakest point of the Portuguese forest fire defense is the fixed detection system. One of the more political changes made since 2006 was to move management of the forest fire lookout towers (RPNVs) from the AFN (National Forest Authority) to the GNR (Republican National Guard). Starting this year, the GNR was required to hire the chronically unemployed to staff the RPNV towers. The new staff was inadequately trained and often had low morale from being required to work in towers far from their own communities. This often resulted in late reporting of new fires leading to more area burned before the fire fighters could respond.

CHALLENGES REMAIN

¶8. (U) Portuguese firefighting capabilities have increased

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since 2006 but the environmental risk of extended periods of extreme burning conditions has also increased. Efforts to reduce the number of human ignitions are showing positive results, but the number of annual occurrences is still high. 97 percent of fire ignitions in Portugal are human-caused. National education campaigns are making progress, but instilling appreciation for the value of Portugal's forest resources and the need to protect them may take a generation.

¶9. (U) Structural forest fuel (e.g., dry brush, dead trees) treatment skills have improved and the basis of a viable structural defense program has been established. However, fuels are being added to forests much faster than they are being removed, and areas burned extensively in 2003 and 2005 are now ready to burn again. Portugal needs to expand the annual fuel treatment program beyond the 10-year average area burned by wildfire.

¶10. (U) Increased combat capacity is likely to be effective in years with normal and below normal burning conditions when fires are located primarily on the populated coastal side of the country, but even in some normal years firefighters may be stressed to respond to large fires in rural inland forested areas. The increased capacity is likely to be inadequate in an extreme fire year, and rural inland forested areas would be subject to the greatest impact because of suppression priorities for urban-forest interface communities.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) Although the 2005 fire season was devastating it had a silver lining as it became the impetus for the 2006 Forest Defense Against Fire Plan and increased spending for firefighting capabilities. It is fortunate that the FDAFP was released when resources were more plentiful, as it is doubtful that the GOP could afford to be so generous with funding for firefighting after the onset of the global recession. We hope the GOP will sustain public education and forestry management efforts, and post will continue to

support and report on forestry-related activities. End comment.

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